

LANDMARKS DESIGNATION REPORT



Palmolive Building

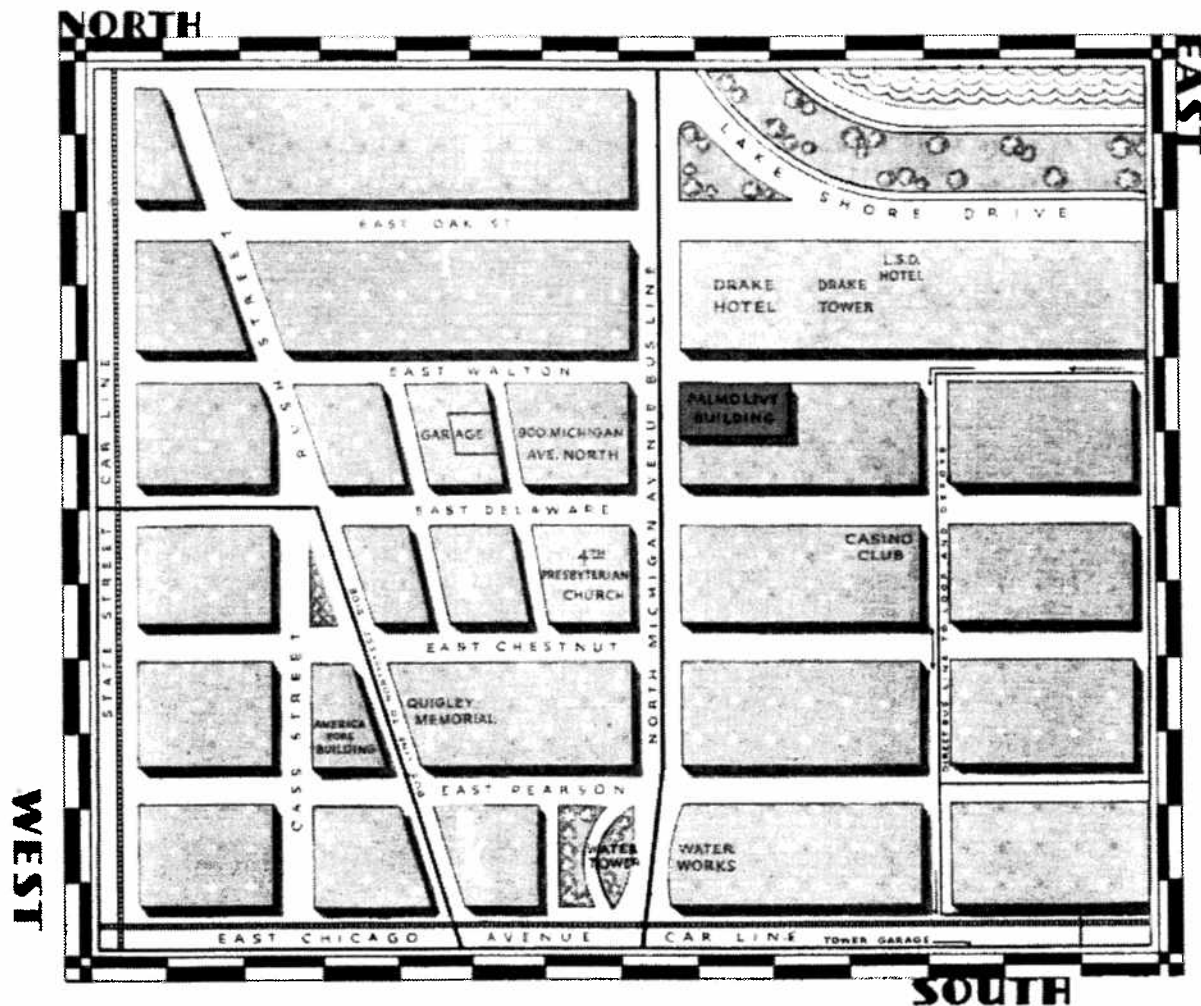
919 North Michigan Avenue

Submitted to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks on April 7, 1999



CITY OF CHICAGO
Richard M. Daley, Mayor

Department of Planning and Development
Christopher R. Hill, Commissioner



Above

A map from the Palmolive Building's original rental brochure, showing its location relative to other Near North Side attractions and streetcar lines.

Cover

This woodcut by Chicago artist Charles Turzak contrasts the monumentality of the Palmolive Building with the low-scale nature of the Fourth Presbyterian Church and its cloister. The artwork was published in a 1933 guidebook to Chicago.

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, was established in 1968. The Commission is responsible for recommending to the City Council which individual buildings, sites, objects or districts should be designated as Chicago Landmarks.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council following a detailed designation process. It begins with a staff report on the historical and architectural background and significance of the proposed landmark. The next step is a vote by the Landmarks Commission as to whether the proposed landmark is worthy of consideration. Not only does this preliminary vote initiate the formal designation process, but it places the review of city permits for the property under the jurisdiction of the Commission until the final landmark recommendation is acted on by the City Council.

Please note that this landmark designation report is subject to possible revision during the designation process. Only language contained within the designation ordinance recommended to the City Council should be regarded as final.

Palmolive Building

919 North Michigan Avenue

Built: 1927-29

Architect: Holabird & Root

Few skyscrapers in the United States better defined the optimism of the 1920s and the progressive character of architecture than the Palmolive Building. It marked a watershed for modern commercial architecture in Chicago: with its streamlined, monumental form, highlighted by dramatic setbacks, the Palmolive heralded a decidedly new form for the design of skyscrapers.

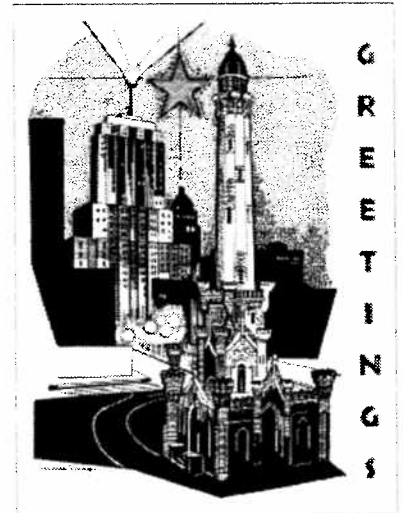
Today, the Palmolive Building is widely recognized as a defining example of streamlined Art Deco architecture. When it opened it was called a “monument to cleanliness,” referring as much to its sleek design as to the soapmaking business of the building’s owner.

The Palmolive Building is among the premier buildings by Holabird & Root, one of the city’s preeminent architectural firms. It was built during the firm’s golden era, the 1920s and 30s, when Holabird & Root created a number of award-winning designs. Architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable has referred to this period as the partnership’s “brilliant succession of modernistic skyscrapers of a radical, streamlined elegance.”

The construction of the Palmolive Building also served as an important milestone in establishing North Michigan Avenue as a leading commercial address. Located at the far northern end of this famed boulevard, its exciting design brought attention to a location that not even a decade before was considered too far from the Loop for a commercial highrise. Its construction also reflected the foresight of the Palmolive-Peet Company, which built it just as North Michigan Avenue was beginning to be recognized as the “aristocratic thoroughfare of Chicago,” in the words of one contemporary critic. Since its opening, the Palmolive Building has been an indelible icon on the city skyline, celebrated in guidebooks and postcards, and admired by both tourists and lifelong city residents.

The Palmolive Company and its “Monument to Cleanliness”

The planned construction of the Palmolive Building was announced in the *Chicago Tribune* (July 24, 1927) with metaphorical exuberance:



This c.1955 holiday greeting card by renowned local artist Frances Badger depicts two Chicago icons of distinctly different generations: the Old Chicago Water Tower and the Palmolive Building.



The Palmolive Building shortly after its completion in 1929.

Upper Michigan Avenue is to have a 42-story monument to cleanliness—a soaring suds skyscraper, lathered into steel, stone and stability by the millions in all parts of the world who use the various bath and beauty products of the Palmolive Peet Company. In other words, the Palmolive interests, claimed to be the largest makers of toilet soap in the world, are going to erect a towering structure at the southeast corner of Michigan Avenue and Walton Place, directly across the street from the Drake [Hotel].

The new corporate headquarters (built to 37 stories, not the announced 42) was the culmination of more than 60 years of company growth. Founded in 1864 in Milwaukee as the G. J. Johnson Soap Company, it changed its name in 1916 to the Palmolive Company in recognition of the successful line of all-vegetable soap that had been developed by Caleb Johnson, the founder's son, from the oils of palm and olive. By the time Palmolive moved its general offices to Chicago in 1923, it was the world's largest user of olive oil (for the making of the bath soap) and cottonseed oil (for laundry soap).

The Palmolive Company located its world headquarters in the newly opened London Guarantee Building at Wacker Drive and Michigan Avenue. It also had factories in Berkeley, Calif., Kansas City, Milwaukee, Mexico City, and Toronto, as well as cities in Europe, South America, and Australia. In 1927, Palmolive merged with Peet Brothers Manufacturing Co. of Kansas City, and a year later with the Colgate Company, forming the Colgate-Palmolive-Peet Company.

The success of major real estate developments on North Michigan Avenue prompted the company to look there for a site for a new headquarters building. The Wrigley Company had been pioneers on the newly opened avenue with the construction of its headquarters at 400 N. Michigan Ave. in 1924. Other prominent skyscrapers—Tribune Tower (435 N. Michigan Ave.), the Allerton Hotel (701 N. Michigan Ave.), and the Central Life Insurance Company Building (720 N. Michigan Ave.; since demolished)—were completed the same year.

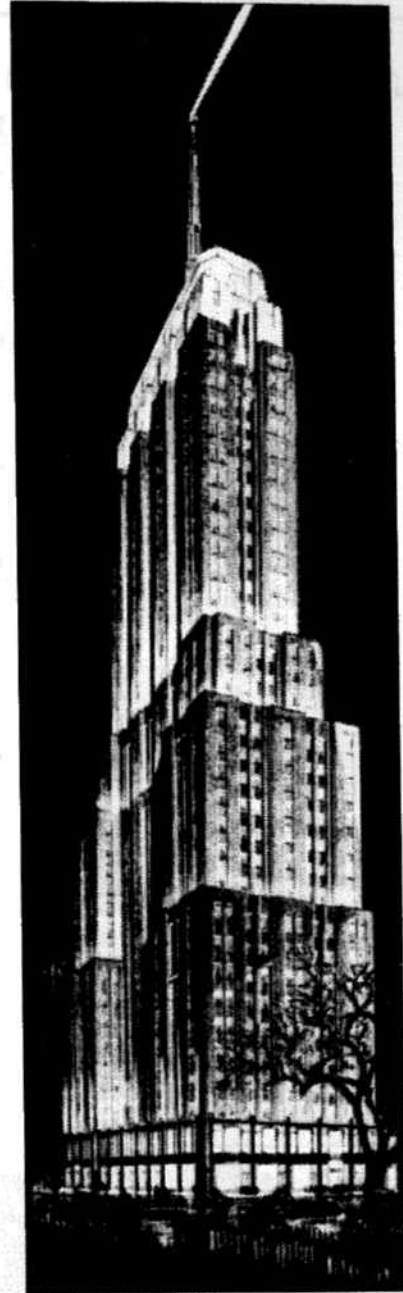
In 1927, the Palmolive-Peet Company paid \$1.25 million for a half-block parcel (231' x 172') at the southeast corner of Walton Place and Michigan Avenue. The syndicate that sold the property was composed of contractor Henry Paschen, architect Walter Ahlschlager, and others who originally had intended to develop a Ritz Hotel on the site.

The height of the proposed new office building varied throughout the planning phase. Early announcements were for a 42-story edifice, but stated that it was possible that only five stories—with foundations for another 37 stories—would be built initially. By April 1928 the planned height had risen to 13 stories, and by July, the company had decided to build to 37 stories based on the high demand for tenant space.



Foundation work began in March 1928. The size of the building and its location near Lake Michigan gave the contractor, the Lundhoff Bicknell Co., unusual problems. During the winter of 1928-29, according to a description in *Architectural Forum*, the building “presented a perfect target for the zero [-degree] winds that came tearing down over the 360-mile open stretch of water to the north.” Workers had to be lashed to beams in order not to be blown off of the framework; steel and stone could only be hoisted on calm days; and blowtorches had to be used to melt snow and ice that was continually forming on the steelwork. Despite these difficulties, the construction moved forward quickly and, by April 1929, the first tenants had moved into the building.

The building’s dramatic, 468-foot, towering form made it an instant landmark on the Near North Side. The Palmolive Company’s reputation for hygiene, as well as the building’s stately appearance, played heavily in the advertising that was released in conjunction with its official opening in June 1929. Billed as a “monument to that schoolgirl complexion,” the building was described as “close to the city’s center, yet removed from traffic congestion and smoke.” Employees were said to be “delighted at the prospect of moving North to clear, sootless skies and sunlight.”

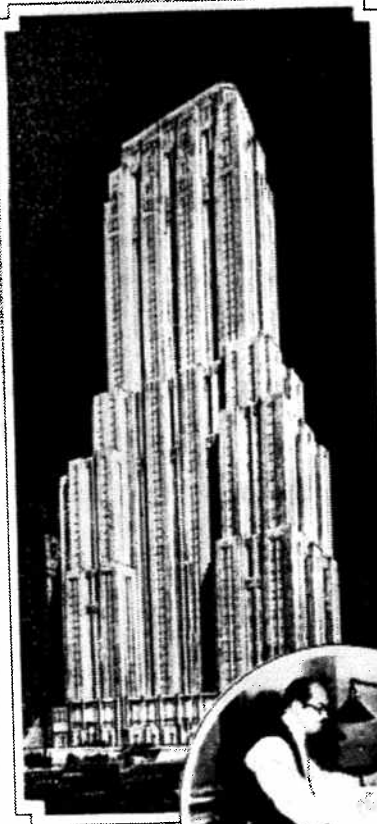


An early design for the Palmolive Building called for 13 stories (left). Three months later, due to high tenant demand, it was revised to 37 stories. Both renderings are by Gilbert Hall, chief designer for Holabird & Root.

A monument to that SCHOOLGIRL COMPLEXION...



SAVING ROOMS TO THE NOISY LOOP, Arthur K. Thayer, Manager of Plant Block 510, which owns "Photo and Retouch," is showing the plans for the Palmolive Building, which he is moving to the new building, together with the new corner of advertising and publishing offices in Chicago.



ALBERT D. LASKER SIGNS ON THE DOTTED LINE and Lord & Taylor and Logan, world-famed advertising agency, to which the famous Advertising Board chief, A. L. Newman, has become the first office tenant in the new Palmolive Building.



MIGUEL ALFERREZ, A TALENTED MEXICAN WOOD CARVER, is busy working on the symbolic statues for the side water cars and doors of the new Palmolive Building, each symbol representing some primitive woman preserved for "schoolgirl complexion." The cars of high speed, fully automatic elevators, however, are probably the finest and water installations ever made in an American office building.



BEHIND AN TOMORROW'S secretary, the new Palmolive Building, is shown right, to the center and lower, general example of American skyscraper architecture. Most of all, the New North Side, the Palmolive Building is destined to become world famous. 1215 North Michigan Avenue will be an address of distinction for the leading firms who are taking up a lease.



THE ARTIST DREAMS OF today lives the new skyscraper business man. Long and slender arches and he spans the hallmarks of yesterday. All these drawings, made by Bert P. Davis at Skidmore, O'Neil, Merrill, Pawson and Shoenberger, conceived and planned the soaring facade of the Palmolive Building.

COMING SOON TO THE PALMOLIVE BUILDING will be made for occupancy, April 1st, 1929. This recent picture shows the important, grand entrance, 458 feet 8 inches above the corner of North Michigan Avenue and Warren Place.



AN INSPIRING VIEW OF THE LOOP, looking South from the 37th floor of the Palmolive Building. Close to the city's center, yet removed from traffic congestion and smoke, the tenants of this imposing structure will enjoy the comparative quietness which is theirs in every direction.



A GROUP OF PALMOLIVE GIRLS will "break" their "schoolgirl complexion" at the prospect of making North Michigan Avenue their headquarters in the Near North Side district, agree that the better type of office workers seek out with comparative certainty, the new Palmolive Building.

This advertisement appeared in a Sunday edition of the *Chicago Tribune*, prior to the building's occupancy in April 1929. The ad boasts of the building's location "close to the city's center, yet removed from traffic congestion and smoke," which will help promote the "schoolgirl complexions" associated with Palmolive products and employees.



The Palmolive's company magazine, *The Pulse* (June 1929), underscored the environmental benefits of the location over the Loop:

The building is to the north of the dark skies and crowded streets of the Chicago loop. The majestic and tapering tower stands alone and clean-cut against the clear horizon on the boundary between the residential and business districts of the city. Magnificent far-sweeping views, from the upper floors over the lake and city, will bring new pleasure to working hours and new inspirations for the workers in the building.

From the higher stories you can look West over Industrial Chicago, North to the smoke which marks Waukegan, South over the Loop, or East to the sand cliffs of Michigan.

Here, in these new surroundings, will the employees watch and aid toward the future growth and prosperity of the Company, which is already a leader in its field. Even as the Company is outstanding so is the building a landmark on the city's skyline.

The Palmolive gained even further attention in 1930 when a two-billion-candlepower light was erected atop the building as a navigational aid for airline pilots. Mounted on a 150-foot, steel-and-aluminum tower on the Palmolive roof, the revolving carbon-arc beacon was a luminous wonder as it swept across the night sky every 30 seconds. A second beam, underneath the main beacon, was set in a fixed position pointing to the southwest toward the Chicago Municipal (now Midway) Airport.

The light—called “Chicago’s skyline signature” in *Rediscovering Art Deco U.S.A.*—was legendary for its brightness. According to one account, it could be seen in an aircraft 500 miles away flying at an altitude of 43,000 feet. The same article also reported that, in a test of the beacon’s brightness in 1937, an airplane passenger could read a newspaper by the beacon’s light 27 miles away.

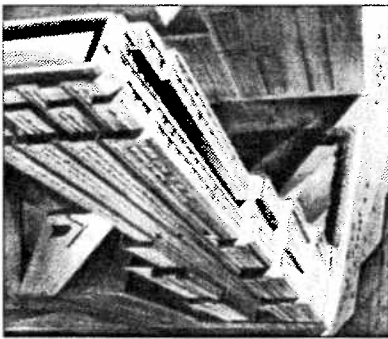


For half a century, the “Palmolive Beacon” was a nighttime landmark of the Chicago skyline (top left, c.1930). The beacon, shown being hoisted to its location atop the building’s 150-foot mast (above), was said to be visible to ship captains hundreds of miles north of Chicago.

The beacon was donated by Elmer Sperry, head of the Sperry Gyroscope Company, and was originally named for aviator Charles Lindbergh who piloted the first solo trans Atlantic flight in 1927. When the celebrated pilot failed to accept the honor, the light was renamed the "Palmolive Beacon."

The light was temporarily extinguished twice during its history: during World War II, when there was concern that it would draw enemy planes to Chicago, and during the energy crisis in 1973. Complaints from residents of highrises, as well as the light's obsolescence for navigation, led to the dismantlement of the beacon in 1981. It was removed in 1988 and is now a museum artifact in Appleton, Wisconsin. A steady omnidirectional light, consisting of high-power fluorescent tubes arranged in eight foot vertical strips around the original light tower, was installed in its place.

Building Description



This dramatic birds-eye rendering appeared in the building's original rental brochure.

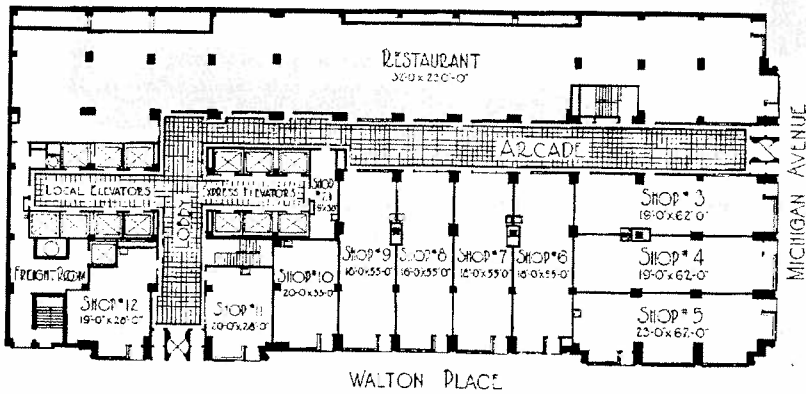
The design of the Palmolive Building is an architectural tour-de-force. According to architectural historian Robert Bruegmann, who has written extensively on Holabird & Root, the Palmolive Building is "a nearly perfect expression of the high set-back skyscrapers" of the 1920s and 30s.

The appearance of the Palmolive Building was a dramatic departure from previous office buildings in Chicago. Its 37 floors rose in a series of setbacks, like the stages of a telescope, culminating in a central tower. The two-story building base is built out to the lot lines, but from there the building tapers upward in a series of six setbacks, giving the design a strong vertical emphasis. In addition, deep cutouts in the walls create vertical channels, reinforcing this soaring character.

According to architectural historian John Stamper, in *Chicago's North Michigan Avenue*, "The visual result of both the setbacks and the recessed bays is a rhythmic play of projecting and receding limestone surface that avoids the kind of boxy look in which one building seems to stand on top of another."

The exterior is clad with smooth Bedford limestone. In the recessed bays, the spandrels underneath the windows are terra cotta, with incised classical decoration. The double-hung windows have steel frames.

The lower two stories featured a distinctive design. Two-story, fluted cast-iron colonettes topped with lights, separated the display windows and entrances. The windows, as well as the two entrances, on the Walton and Michigan elevations, were elegantly trimmed in nickel,



The Palmolive Building originally featured two street entrances, lined with restaurants and shops (left). The Michigan Avenue entry was later closed and the original storefronts (right) were remodeled in 1982 (above, left).

giving them a lustrous finish. These floors have been remodeled twice since the building was constructed, changing the original design and materials. The projecting bay treatment of the current storefronts was built in 1982 in the spirit of the original design. The nickel door and window trim has been replaced with painted metal.

The quality of the original interior finishes matched that of the exterior. The ground-floor vestibule was lined with shops and restaurants. The floor was of gray and pink marble while the walls, as well as the elevator doors, were Circassian walnut. The elevator doors feature stylized geometric bas-relief of Native American women. The panels were sculpted by Mexican-native artist Enrique Alferez (b.1901), a student of Lorado Taft. They are the only known works in Chicago by Alferez who, in 1929, moved to New Orleans, where his sculptures are recognized as a prominent part of that city's public art collection.

The lobby metalwork, such as display cases, mailboxes, and the window and door frames, was done in nickel, complementing the



The original lobby, since remodeled, featured walnut paneling and polished nickel fixtures. The elevator cabs and doors still display wood reliefs by Enrique Alferez (above).



walnut woodwork. Shops also lined the second floor, though the materials differed from those of the first floor, e.g., bronze elevator doors rather than walnut, a terrazzo floor instead of marble.

The Alferez-sculpted elevator cabs are the only remnants of the original lobby design. The Michigan Avenue entrance and its arcade are now retail space, and in the Walton Street lobby the original marble floors, walnut paneling, and nickel trim have been replaced.

The Palmolive Building has always been known for its nighttime appearance due to the exterior lighting that highlights its sculptural appearance. The flat wall surfaces have lent themselves well to nighttime illumination, as floodlights at the bases of the setbacks emphasize the structure's verticality. One early account of the building speculated that color would be used in future illumination schemes, although it's not known that it ever was.

The nighttime effect of the building gave rise to the name of the building's original restaurant, La Tour d'Argent (the Silver Tower). Today the building continues to be floodlit, using the original mountings. Between 1934 and 1940, a 22-story cross decorated the north side of the building at Christmas; a smaller Star of Bethlehem graced the south elevation. The dramatic nighttime appearance of the building is one of the most familiar images of Chicago and has probably been depicted as often in postcards and guidebooks as the Palmolive's striking daytime silhouette.

The quality of the building and its prestigious location along North Michigan Avenue made the building an instant success. Upscale businesses leased space in the building. In addition to the eight floors occupied by the Colgate-Palmolive-Peet Company itself, major corporations such as the Celotex Corporation (manufacturers of wallboard and acoustic tile from sugar cane fibers), Household Finance, and Kaiser Aluminum had their offices here.

Other well-established Chicago firms in the building were the Lord & Thomas advertising agency, stockbrokers Eastman Dillon, and the real estate rental and management firm of Ross & Browne. Commonwealth Edison had a 50-year lease to use the basement as an electrical substation.

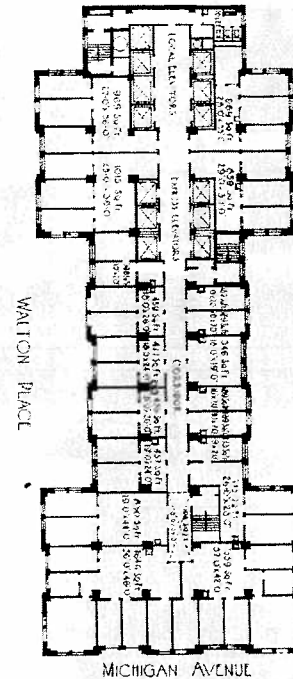
During the 1920s and 30s, various communications-related businesses, such as advertisers, broadcasters, and publishers, occupied many of North Michigan Avenue's buildings, including the Palmolive. *Esquire* magazine was one of the building's tenants.

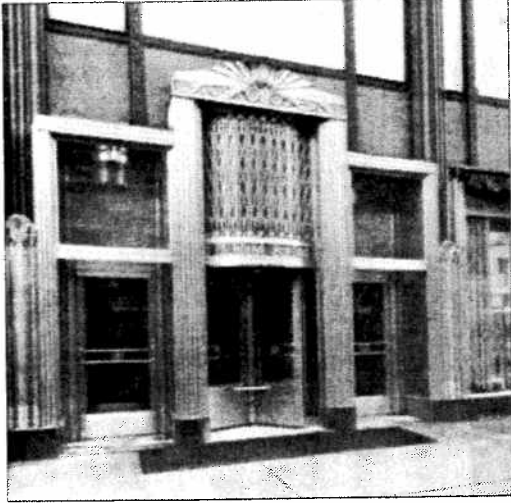
The original rental brochure noted that the "executive chambers" above the twenty-second floor were particularly appealing to "estates, capitalists, and retired businessmen" while the larger floor plates on the lower floors were suitable for general office space. Even during the depths of the Depression in 1933, the Palmolive enjoyed an 88 percent occupancy rate.

The layout of the office floors was conducive to smaller firms. Because of the shallow depth of the building, the offices on each floor were organized around a central corridor, giving the offices excellent light and views. The building's rental brochure praised this layout for its modernity: "There is no circling corridor around an inner court to confuse the stranger. One walks straight from the elevators in one direction to any office door." The Palmolive's layout of small, high-rent offices, in contrast to the large, flexible floor plates of older commercial buildings in the Loop, enhanced the building's image as an up to-date business environment.

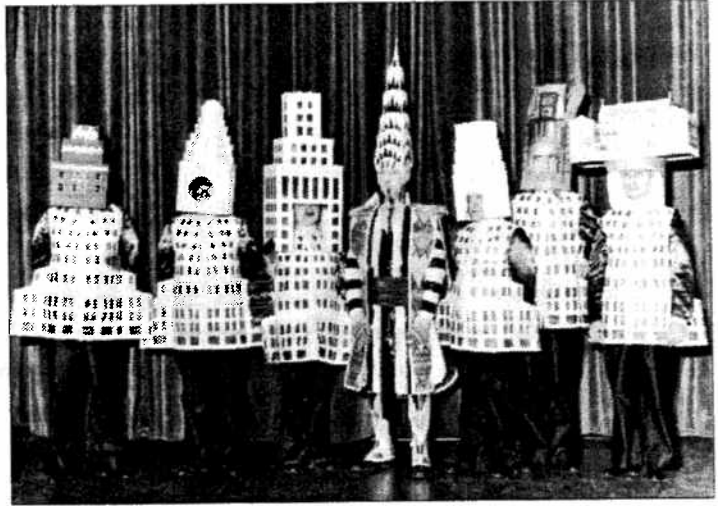
A Defining Example of an Art Deco Skyscraper

The Palmolive Building is one of the finest examples in the country of the Art Deco setback skyscrapers of the 1920s. Influenced by municipal zoning laws and the dramatic renderings of New York architect Hugh Ferriss, the style was characterized by linear, hard-edged building designs with strong vertical emphasis.





Art Deco was a popular style for skyscrapers of the late 1920s and early 30s. The stepped-back character of these buildings is humorously depicted (right) in this 1931 photo of a New York City costume ball featuring architects dressed as their designs. At left: the Palmolive's original Michigan Avenue entry (no longer extant) combined modern geometric forms with classical details.

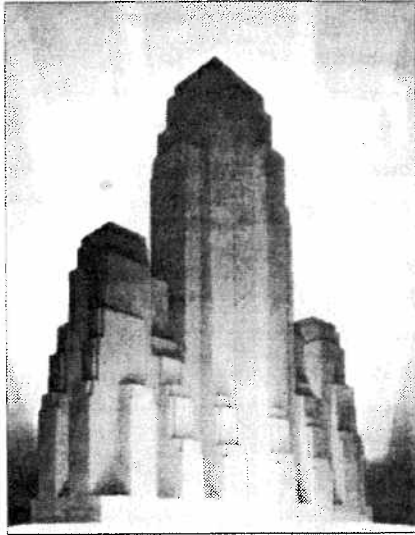


The authors of *Rediscovering Art Deco U.S.A.*, a compendium of Art Deco architecture, describe the Palmolive Building as a “masterpiece.” Although Art Deco skyscrapers often featured either neo-Classical or abstract geometric decoration, the style’s impact relied more on the geometric character of the overall building design than on its applied ornamental detailing. The tapered sculptural appearance of the Palmolive Building is a signature of Art Deco highrises.

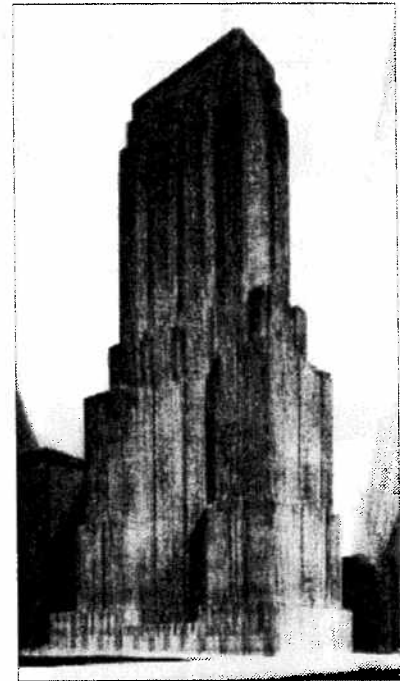
The Art Deco style, which came to fruition in the late 1920s and continued through the Depression years of the 1930s, was a widely popular form of architectural and decorative design. It offered a visual grammar free of historical precedent and one that reflected a newness that was in keeping with the changing, “modern” social trends of the post-World War I era. According to Alan Gowans, an expert on American architectural styles and their meanings, the esthetic taste for easy-flowing, streamlined designs reflected a broader social penchant for contemporary approaches rather than traditional ways of doing things.

Nowhere was this attitude more prominent than in the development of highrise architecture. Architects responded to the introduction of municipal zoning laws in the 1910s and 20s by developing the distinctive form that became the Art Deco skyscraper. These laws encouraged developers and architects to erect buildings with pronounced setbacks and towers—to provide more light and air in business districts—in exchange for the ability to construct taller buildings.

New York City led the way in the development of setback skyscrapers, prompted by the passage of that city’s zoning ordinance in 1916 and a series of visually dramatic renderings by Hugh Ferriss. Working with Harvey Corbett on a series of “zoning envelope studies” in 1922, Ferriss depicted buildings as simplified sculptural masses. “These striking



Hugh Ferriss' famed zoning envelope studies for New York City in 1922 (far left) suggested a new form for the modern skyscraper. The Straus Building (near left), completed in 1924, was one of Chicago's first post-zoning skyscrapers. By the time the Palmolive Building (below) was designed, the influence of Ferriss' work was more evident.



images,” according to architectural historian Carol Willis, “revealed the elemental beauty and power inherent in the undisguised setback form; the suppression of ornament and historical allusion influenced architects who were searching for a ‘modern’ style for the skyscraper.”

Ferriss’ drawings promoted a new esthetic for highrises, which was used in New York skyscrapers from the 1920s through the 1950s: that of soaring vertical towers with austere, unornamented walls. This approach is represented in the Empire State and Chrysler buildings.

The Palmolive’s towering form was the culmination of a decade’s worth of design development for highrises, based on revisions to the Chicago zoning law during the 1920s. In 1893, the city had enacted a 130-foot building height limitation, which it raised and lowered in subsequent years in response to market pressures. In 1920, the city council approved a 260-foot cap that also allowed ornamental—i.e., unoccupied—towers rising to 400 feet, such as those of the Wrigley and London Guarantee buildings.

In 1923, the city approved the construction of occupied towers, allowing the principal portion of the building to rise to 264 feet. The towers, however, were limited to less than one sixth of the cubic volume of the main building and could not have a footprint greater than twenty-five percent of the lot. Buildings like the Straus (310 S. Michigan Ave., 1924), Jewelers (35 E. Wacker Dr., 1926), and the Pittsfield (55 E. Washington St., 1927) demonstrate how architects experimented with the new towers. The limit on the towers’ volume, however, resulted in highrises that appeared more stocky than soaring, especially in comparison with their counterparts in New York.

The Palmolive Building is distinctive among Chicago highrises for its “New York-style” massing. With the Palmolive, according to Carol Willis in *Form Follows Fiasco: Skyscrapers and Skylines in New York and Chicago*, Holabird & Root departed from the norm for highrise design in Chicago. Instead of designing the building to the maximum 264-foot setback height, the architects chose to give the building incremental setbacks.

Critics noted the innovative character of the building design from the outset. In 1930 it was awarded the gold medal given annually by the Lake Shore Trust and Savings Bank for the most beautiful building to be erected in the near north business district. The jury for the award called the Palmolive Building “a distinguished contribution to contemporary American architecture,” and said “this building of towering and original mass gives beautiful expression to the commercial spirit at its best.” A period guidebook of Chicago called the Palmolive “one of the most significant architectural achievements of recent years.”



John Root, Jr. (left) and John Holabird (second from left) received the prestigious gold medal of the Architectural League of New York in 1930. In the background is a model of the Chicago Daily News Building, which they designed.

Holabird & Root

The Palmolive Building is among the premier works of Holabird & Root, one of the preeminent firms in the history of Chicago architecture. Robert Brueggemann has written that the Palmolive “can perhaps be considered the firm’s most exemplary work of the late 1920s.”

Holabird & Root is the successor firm of Holabird & Roche, whose 19th-century commercial designs influenced architectural designs around the world. With the deaths of founders William Holabird and Martin Roche, in 1923 and 1927 respectively, control of the firm passed to John A. Holabird (1886-1945), William’s son, and John W. Root, Jr. (1887-1963). Root’s father, with Daniel Burnham, had founded the important Chicago architecture firm of Burnham & Root.

The younger Holabird and Root had met during the 1910s, while studying at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. From their study in Paris the two received not only the benefits of the classical Beaux-Arts training but exposure to the most contemporary art trends. They worked briefly at Holabird & Roche before World War I, and returned to the firm after serving in the war.

During the mid-1920s—even before the firm was reorganized in 1928 as Holabird & Root—the firm’s work began to take on a very contemporary character, largely in response to Chicago’s adoption of a new zoning ordinance in 1923. The firm was key to the development of the new setback-styled skyscrapers in Chicago and elsewhere in the Midwest.



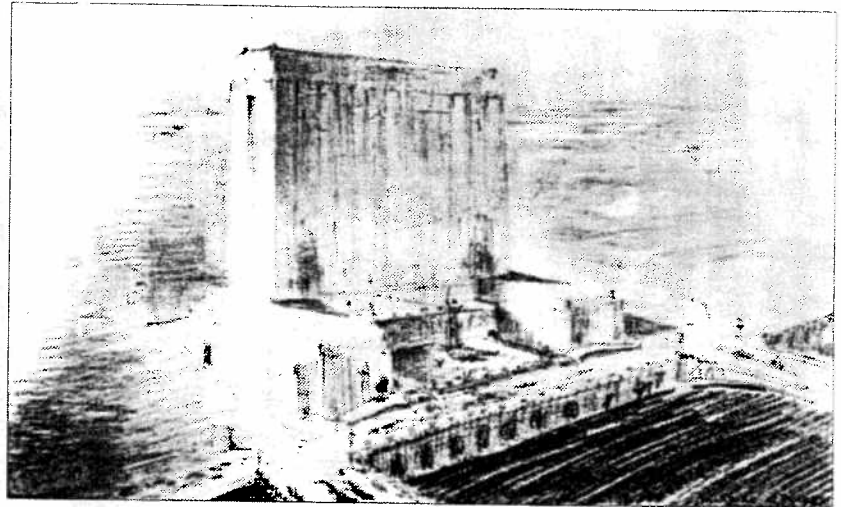
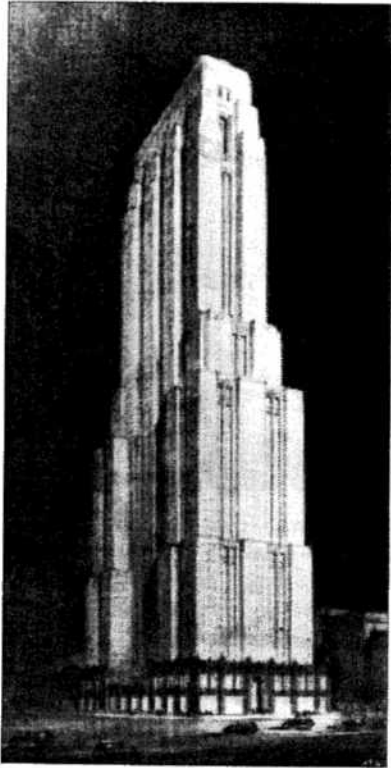
Among the many designs of Holabird & Root during the late 1920s and early 30s are the Chicago Board of Trade (detail, above) and the 333 North Michigan Building (near left). The latter design was inspired by Eliel Saarinen's famed entry (far left) for the Tribune Tower design competition in 1922.

In addition to the broader influence of New York's skyscraper designs, Holabird and Root's design approach was shaped by Eliel Saarinen's famed design for the Tribune Tower competition in 1922. Although another design was chosen, Saarinen's vision of a streamlined tower, with continuous recessed vertical bands, was highly praised and copied.

Holabird & Root elaborated on Saarinen's concepts, bringing this dramatic form into fruition with their work of the late 1920s and 30s. Bruegmann and other architectural historians have cited these years as one of the most brilliant periods in the firm's history, when so many of its great masterpieces were constructed. Buildings such as the Chicago Motor Club, 333 N. Michigan Avenue, Daily News (now Riverside Plaza), Board of Trade, and the Palmolive all reflect the modernistic character of their work and are widely renowned for the quality of their design and planning.

The design character of all these buildings owes considerably to the talents of Gilbert Hall (1884-1971) who was one of the firm's chief designers during this period. Trained at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, where he met Root, Hall was one of the most renowned draftsmen and architectural renderers of the period. He was regarded as "the most gifted designer of tall buildings in America" by Alfred Hoyt Granger, a prominent Chicago architect and one-time president of the American Institute of Architects' Chicago Chapter.

Hall's contributions were part of a thorough design development process used by Holabird & Root. When a project came into the office,



Gilbert Hall's talent for producing evocative architectural renderings, such as those for the Palmolive Building (top, left) and the Chicago Daily News Building (right), helped establish Holabird & Root's reputation for cutting edge design. Above: Hall in 1930.

the preliminary planning staff analyzed the client's needs and prepared block diagrams of spaces and their location in the building. It was Hall who, working with Holabird and Root, would take these basic schemes and work out the detailed plans and elevations. The working drawings were then prepared by a large drafting department.

Hall also prepared charcoal renderings of the projects which were very much in the spirit of Hugh Ferriss' evocative renderings. Hall's rendering talents, according to architectural historian Robert Irving, were "a most persuasive gift" through which he:

could lend substance and substantiality to the most ephemeral projects. Since Root was prone, after the manner of his [Beaux-Arts teachers], to sketch out a design idea quite vaguely, leaving it for others to detail, it was as well that Hall possessed his wondrous powers of realization.

Holabird & Root's work earned it a national reputation. In 1930, the firm received the gold medal of the Architectural League of New York "for the great distinction and high architectural quality which they have achieved in the solution of the American office building." Writing in *Architecture* magazine, Chicago architect Earl Reed, Jr. praised the firm's work:

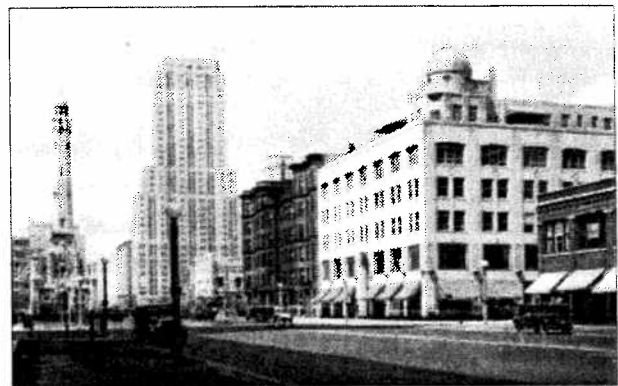
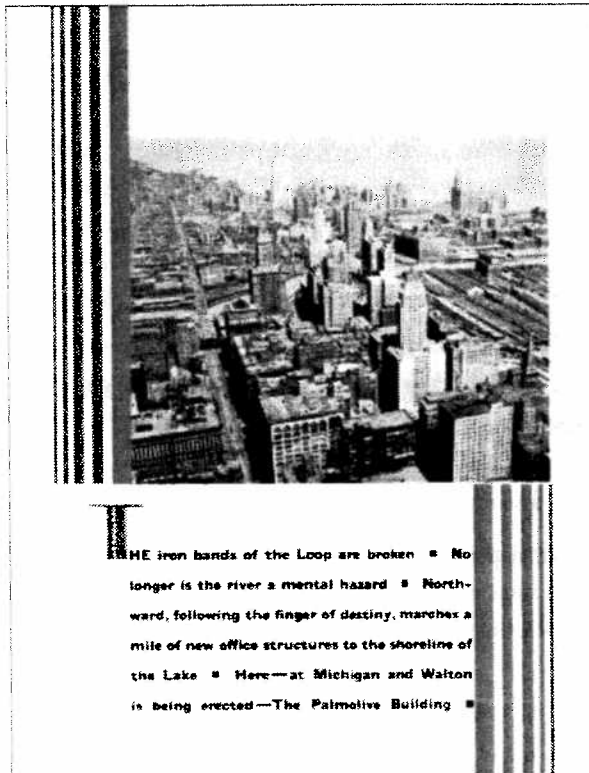
A dozen or more [buildings] by the young-old firm of Holabird & Root stand out in my mind, large and small, complete and unfinished, each as the glorification in architecture of the American commercial spirit at its best. In these buildings the forms of yesterday and today are indiscriminately used with a mastery of proportion and good taste which delights the passer-by. Nothing so truly significant has happened here since the pre-Columbian Exposition days which witnessed the coming to our streets of the epoch-making work of that mighty band which surrounded Louis Sullivan.

The late architectural historian Carl Condit, who authoritatively chronicled the development and significance of Chicago's commercial highrises, stated that Holabird & Root's work during this period was "the decisive step in breaking with the past and reintroducing to Chicago the modern skyscraper that [Louis] Sullivan had developed years before."

North Michigan Avenue: "Chicago's Aristocratic Thoroughfare"

The monumental appearance of the Palmolive Building, as well as its refined styling, has made the building one of the city's most famed visual landmarks since the time of its construction. It has been celebrated in guidebooks and postcards as a landmark both of North Michigan Avenue and of the downtown.

Construction of the Palmolive Building a mile from the traditional downtown "broke the iron bands of the Loop," in the words of the building's rental brochure. It also punctuated a decade of intense development on North Michigan Avenue that had begun with the opening of the Michigan Avenue Bridge in 1920. Until that time, the thoroughfare was known as Pine Street, a narrow street of small residences. With the construction of the bridge, Pine Street was widened and renamed Michigan Avenue.



The location of the Palmolive Building at the northern end of Michigan Avenue helped break "the iron bands of the Loop" in terms of commercial highrises. At left: a page from the building's rental brochure. Above: North Michigan Avenue, looking north from Superior Street, in 1929.



The Palmolive Building, as seen in this 1930 aerial photograph, stood out from the otherwise low-density character of the surrounding River North area, including the Drake Hotel and other buildings in the East Lake Shore Drive District (foreground).

The new street was conceived of as Chicago's Champs-Élysées, a great boulevard for a city that increasingly saw itself as a "Paris on the Lake." Businessmen envisioned the avenue as the vital link between the Loop, which remained the main business district, and the Gold Coast, the city's most fashionable neighborhood. In their eyes, it was to be lined with Chicago's most exclusive stores, clubs, hotels, and offices.

Leading modernist architects, such as Philip Maher, Andrew Rebori, and Holabird & Root, were hired to design high-quality buildings for Michigan Avenue. Limestone-clad, Neo-Classical and Art Deco structures gave the street a distinctive cosmopolitan air.

Holabird & Root was the most prolific designer of buildings on the street. In addition to the Palmolive, the firm designed five major buildings on the thoroughfare between 1926 and 1929 (half have been demolished):

- Tobey Building (200 N. Michigan, 1925-26)
- 333 N. Michigan Avenue (1927-28)
- Michigan Square Building (also known as the Diana Court Building, 540 N. Michigan, 1928-29, demolished)
- Michigan-Chestnut Building (1927-28, demolished)
- Judah Building (700 N. Michigan, 1928-29, demolished)

Coincidentally, the construction of the Palmolive Building was announced just two months after that of the 333 North Michigan Avenue Building. The common design characteristics of these buildings—two-story bases with shops and dressed limestone upper stories with minimal ornamentation—were important for establishing and maintaining the street’s cosmopolitan appearance.

North Michigan Avenue’s proximity to residential districts also was considered a significant asset for tenants in the Palmolive Building. Thirty-five percent of Palmolive’s executives lived within a two-mile radius of the building in the Gold Coast and Near North Side.

Recent Years

The building has been remarkably well preserved since its construction. It has changed hands several times. The Colgate Palmolive Company moved to New Jersey in 1934, and sold the building in 1943 to a corporation headed by Walter Ross of Ross, Browne & Fleming, the building’s management company.

It was sold twice more, before Playboy Enterprises acquired a 63-year lease on it in 1965. Two years later, Playboy remodeled the building. The most significant exterior changes were alterations to the first two floors and the erection of two 15-foot Playboy signs at the top of the north and south facades. The signs caused a brief spirited controversy, but they remained until well after the company moved out of the building. The staging for the letters remains in place. Jerrold Wexler and Edward Ross purchased the building in 1979.

The Palmolive Building’s urbane styling gives it a timelessness that makes the building every bit as modern as the newest skyscraper. The quality of its design and craftsmanship makes the Palmolive Building a premier edifice emblematic of Chicago’s Magnificent Mile.



The Palmolive Building was known as the Playboy Building from 1965 to 1989, when it served as headquarters for *Playboy* magazine. This photo dates to 1981.

APPENDICES

Criteria for Designation

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (§ 2-120-620 and 630), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to recommend a building or district for landmark designation if the Commission determines that it meets two or more of the stated “criteria for landmark designation,” as well as possesses a significant degree of its historic design integrity.

Based on the findings in this report, the following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend the Palmolive Building for designation as a Chicago Landmark:

Criterion I: Critical Part of the City’s History

Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois or the United States.

The Palmolive Building was the first commercial skyscraper to be built far from the Loop. Its urbane design and successful operation contributed significantly toward defining an expanded downtown on North Michigan Avenue. The completion of the Palmolive Building in 1929 capped a decade of intense development on North Michigan Avenue that had begun with the opening of the Michigan Avenue Bridge in 1920.

The prominence of the Palmolive Building’s occupants also complemented the high-end retailing and office uses found on North Michigan Avenue during the 1920s and 30s. The Palmolive Company moved to Chicago in 1923 and was initially located in the newly opened London Guarantee Building at Michigan Avenue and Wacker Drive. However, the construction of major buildings on North Michigan Avenue—Wrigley Building (400 N. Michigan Ave.), Tribune Tower (435 N. Michigan Ave.), Allerton Hotel (701 N. Michigan Ave.), and the Central Life Insurance Company Building (720 N. Michigan Ave.; demolished), all completed in 1924—prompted the Palmolive Company to look there for a site for its new headquarters.

The roster of building tenants included a number of major manufacturers, advertisers, and publishers. The Palmolive Company, which occupied eight stories, was one of the world’s largest soap manufacturers. Other major tenants included *Esquire* magazine, Kaiser Aluminum, and Commonwealth Edison. From 1965 through 1989, the building gained celebrity as the headquarters of *Playboy* magazine.

Criterion 4: Important Architecture

Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship.

The Palmolive Building is one of the finest examples in the country of the Art Deco setback skyscrapers of the 1920s. Influenced by municipal zoning laws and the dramatic renderings of New York architect Hugh Ferriss, this stepped-back style found particularly lavish expression in New York and Los Angeles. Chicago has only a few examples, making the Palmolive Building even more significant.

The style was characterized by linear, hard-edged building designs with strong vertical emphasis. Although Art Deco structures often employed either neo-Classical or abstract geometric decoration, the style's impact relied more on the larger geometric character of the overall building design than on its applied ornamental detailing. The tapered sculptural appearance of the Palmolive Building is a signature of Art Deco highrises. The authors of *Rediscovering Art Deco U.S.A.*, a compendium of Art Deco architecture, describe the Palmolive Building as a "masterpiece."

The Palmolive's appearance was also influenced by Eliel Saarinen's famed design for the Tribune Tower competition in 1922. Although another design was chosen, Saarinen's vision of a streamlined tower with continuous recessed vertical bands was highly praised and copied. The Palmolive's similarly recessed walls and resulting verticality are a reference to Saarinen's design.

Critics have noted the innovative character of the Palmolive building design from the outset: In 1930, an awards jury called it "a distinguished contribution to contemporary American architecture," and said "this building of towering and original mass gives beautiful expression to the commercial spirit at its best." An article in *Architecture* magazine compared the building's design to the renowned Chicago School of architecture, forty years earlier: "Nothing so truly significant has happened (in Chicago) since the pre-Columbian Exposition days which witnessed the coming to our streets of the epoch-making work of that mighty band which surrounded Louis Sullivan."

Criterion 5: Important Architect

Its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose individual work is significant in the history or development of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.

The Palmolive Building is among the best known works of Holabird & Root, one of Chicago's oldest and most prestigious architecture firms. As architectural historian Robert Brueggemann has noted:

The Palmolive Building is one of the nation's finest examples of an Art Deco-style setback skyscraper.

“If Chicago deserves its appellation of ‘America’s most architectural city,’ then this firm deserves a large amount of the credit.”

Holabird & Root was the successor firm to Holabird & Roche, the partnership whose 19th-century commercial designs, seen in buildings such as the Marquette (140 N. Dearborn, 1895; a designated Chicago Landmark), influenced architectural designs around the world. In 1928, control of the firm passed to John A. Holabird (1886-1945), William’s son, and John W. Root, Jr. (1887-1963). The new partnership quickly established its own reputation for significant architecture.

With their skyscraper designs of the late 1920s, especially with the Palmolive, they developed an innovative and distinctive stepped-back form for commercial skyscrapers. It featured setbacks and continuous recessed vertical bands, which gave their buildings a streamlined and emphatically vertical feeling. This form is dramatically seen in the Palmolive Building.

Bruegmann and other scholars regard these years as a brilliant period in the firm’s history, when many of its great masterpieces were constructed. Buildings such as 333 N. Michigan Avenue, the Daily News Building (now Riverside Plaza), the Board of Trade Building, as well as the Palmolive Building reflect the modernistic character of their work, and are widely renowned for the quality of their design and planning.

The design character of the Palmolive Building, and all of Holabird & Root’s major commissions at the time, owes considerably to the talents of Gilbert Hall (1884-1971), who was one of the firm’s chief designers during this period. Hall developed the detailed plans and elevations for the building, and produced charcoal renderings of the building in a striking style that evoked its modern character.

Trained in Paris at the famed Ecole des Beaux Arts, where he met Root, Hall was one the most renowned draftsmen and architectural renderers of the period. He was regarded as “the most gifted designer of tall buildings in America” by Alfred Hoyt Granger, a prominent Chicago architect and one-time president of the American Institute of Architects’ Chicago Chapter.

Criterion 7: Unique Visual Feature

Its unique location or distinctive physical appearance or presence representing an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community, or the City of Chicago.

Since its opening, the Palmolive Building has been an indelible icon on the city skyline, celebrated in postcards and guidebooks and admired by both tourists and lifelong city residents. It has visually anchored the

far end of North Michigan Avenue, defining what has become one of the premier office, residential, and shopping avenues in the United States.

Its famed beacon made the Palmolive a landmark in the most literal sense of the word. Ship captains could see it from 300 miles away and aviators from 500 miles.

Although the revolving beacon was removed in 1988, its steady omnidirectional replacement light continues to make the building one of the most prominent on the city's skyline.

Built in 1929, a mile away from what was then the traditional downtown, the Palmolive was, and continues to be, one of the most conspicuous buildings in Chicago. Its urbane styling gives the building a timelessness that makes it every bit as modern as the newest skyscraper built today, 70 years later. The quality of its design and craftsmanship makes the Palmolive Building a premier edifice emblematic of Chicago's Magnificent Mile.

Integrity

The integrity of the proposed landmark must be preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, and ability to express its historic community, architectural or aesthetic interest or value.

The exterior of the Palmolive Building retains its historic integrity to a high degree. With the exception of the lower two stories, the remainder of the original exterior design is intact. The masonry has been well preserved, as has the window treatment. The windows have been replaced, but they maintain the original double-hung configuration.

The lower two stories have been remodeled twice since 1929. The projecting bay treatment of the current storefronts was carried out in 1982 in the spirit of the original design.

The Palmolive Building has always been known for its nighttime appearance due to the exterior lighting. Although the original rooftop beacon was removed in 1988, due to complaints from highrise neighbors, an omnidirectional light consisting of high-power fluorescent tubes carries on the tradition of the original beacon. Floodlights, which shine up from the building's multiple setbacks, continue to give the building its glowing effect.

The lobby has been greatly altered, and with the notable exception of the elevator cabs, featuring sculpted figurative panels by Enrique Alferez, neither the original layout nor materials survive.

Since its opening, the Palmolive has been an indelible icon on the city skyline—and a visual anchor to North Michigan Avenue, Chicago's Magnificent Mile.

Significant Historical and Architectural Features

Whenever a building or district is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the “significant historical and architectural features” of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to understand which elements are considered most important to preserve the historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark.

Based on its evaluation of the Palmolive Building, the Commission staff recommends that the significant historical and architectural features be identified as:

- all visible exterior elevations, including their rooflines;
- the rooftop mast of the former Palmolive Beacon;
- the doors and cabs of the twelve elevators that feature the sculpted figurative panels by Enrique Alferez.

Building Rehabilitation Issues

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks bases its review of all city-issued permits related to a landmark property on its adopted *Guidelines for Alterations to Historic Buildings and New Construction*, as well as the U.S. Secretary of the Interior’s *Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings*. The purpose of the Commission’s review is to protect and enhance the landmark’s significant historical and architectural features.

As noted in this report, the exterior appearance of the Palmolive Building is largely intact. The major changes have occurred to the lower two-story storefronts. Although the original nickel-plated trim for the windows and doors is gone, the most recent renovation (by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill in 1982) reinterpreted the form of the original storefronts. Future rehabilitation efforts should continue to respect the historic design character.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CITY OF CHICAGO

Richard M. Daley, Mayor

Department of Planning and Development

Christopher R. Hill, Commissioner

James Peters, Deputy Commissioner

Report Preparation

Timothy Barton, DPD, writing and research

Chicago CartoGraphics, layout

Edward C. Hirschland, The Landhart Corporation, research

Special thanks to Chris Rudolph, Robert Sideman and Harold T. Wolff for assistance in the research for this report.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Charles Turzak, from *All About Chicago* (1933): front cover.

Palmolive Building rental brochure (1929): inside front cover, pp. 6, 7 (plan), 9 (plan), 15 (left).

Frances Badger, from Collection of Barton Faist: p. 1.

Chicago Historical Society, Holabird & Root Collection: pp. 2, 3, 4, 5 (top, right) 7, 8, 9 (bottom), 11 (below), 12, 14 (top, left & right).

Chicago Historical Society, Hedrich-Blessing Collection: p. 5 (top, left).

Chicago Historical Society, Prints & Photographs: p. 15 (right), 16.

Inland Architect (May 1982): pp. 7(top, left & right), 10 (left).

American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America: pp. 10 (right), 11 (top, left).

The Sky's the Limit: p. 11 (near left).

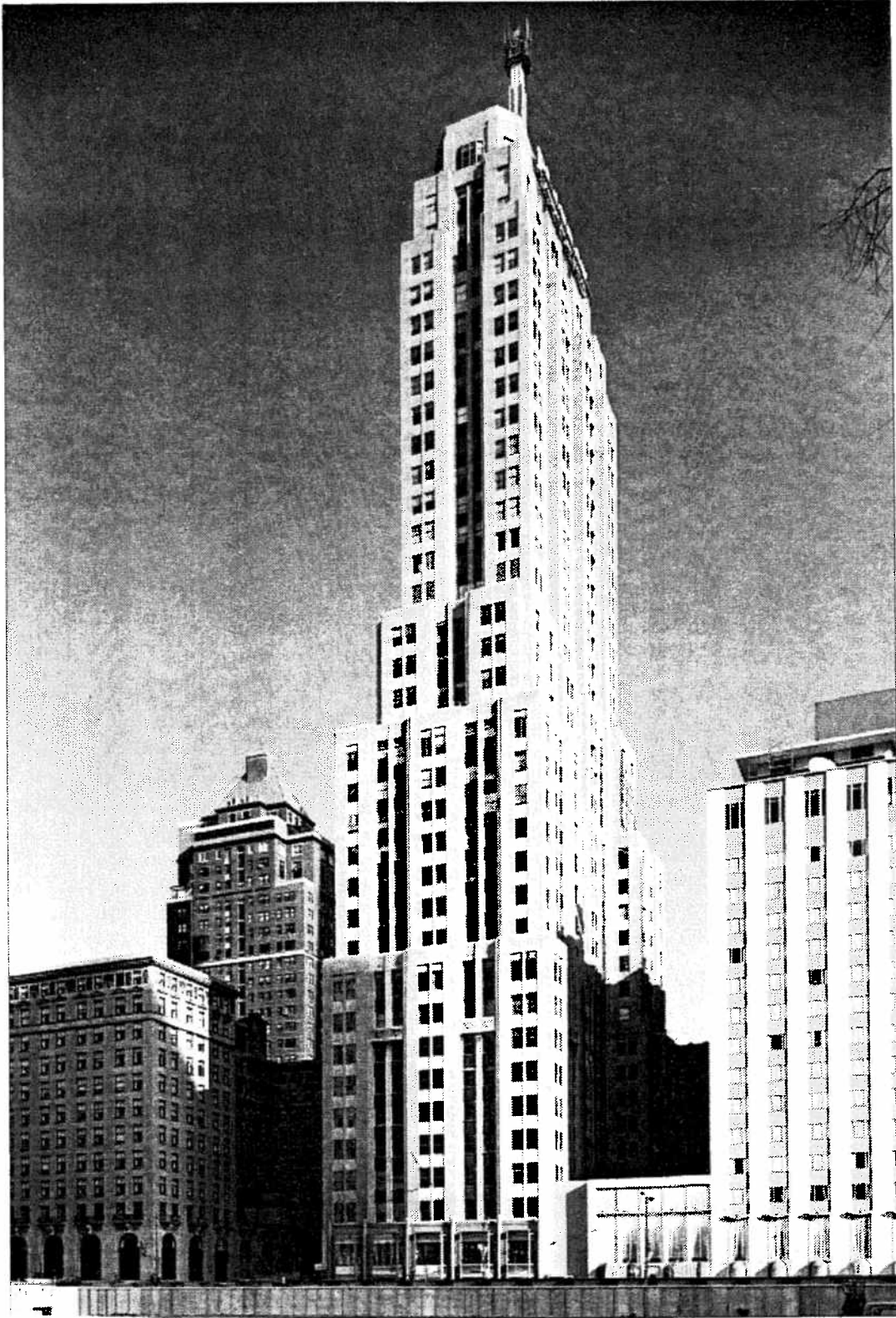
Skyscraper Style: Art Deco New York: p. 13 (left).

Chicago Architectural Photographing Co., from Art Institute of Chicago: p. 13 (middle).

Barbara Crane, for the Commission on Chicago Landmarks: p. 13 (right).

Treads and Risers (March 1930):p. 14 (bottom).

Bob Thall, for the Commission on Chicago Landmarks: pp. 17, inside back cover.



Despite its massive size, the Palmolive Building's narrow facade facing Michigan Avenue emphasizes the streamlined quality of the design—and its enduring modernity. This 1984 photograph was taken from the site of the soon-to-be-constructed 900 North Michigan Avenue Building.